

Open Letters.

[true tales of modern life]



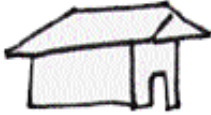
December 2, 2000
(special "This American Life" edition)

"I think I'm a better person because I have words like 'more perfect union' to live up to. The other day, in the subway at 5:30, I was crammed into my sweaty, crabby fellow citizens and I kept whispering under my breath 'we the people, we the people' over and over again."

– Sarah Vowell, "American Dreams"

This special issue of Open Letters
features letters from:
X,
Sarah Vowell,
Paul Tough,
Ian Brown,
John Hodgman,
and Michael Welch,
as well as a conversation with Sarah Jones.

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Open up.



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Dear "This American Life" listeners,

Welcome to a special issue of *Open Letters* designed and published for distribution at this month's "This American Life" live shows. For those of you who haven't seen *Open Letters* before, here's what we are: a magazine of first-person writing in the form of personal correspondence. That's the technical definition, anyway: we want our readers to think of the magazine mostly as an entertaining and thought-provoking collection of personal reports from all over; an intensely subjective chronicle of contemporary life. We ask our correspondents to write in letter form because we think it helps them develop a more direct and intimate connection with their subjects and their readers. One reader described our contents as "little pieces of literature disguised as correspondence," and that went down pretty well with us.

We distribute these open letters to our readers in two ways: first, as a weekly magazine (much like this one) distributed each Sunday to subscribers, via email, as an easy-to-print digital file called a PDF; and second, as a daily web magazine, at www.openletters.net.

Since its inception in June, *Open Letters* has had a close kinship with "This American Life." I'm a contributing editor and a former senior editor of the show; my fellow editor Susan Burton was a producer there. We've also featured a number of letters from frequent TAL contributors, including Sarah Vowell, Scott Carrier, Blue Chevigny, and Ian Brown. And TAL webmeister Elizabeth Meister has provided us with bountiful support and advice.

This special issue is meant to serve as an introduction to *Open Letters* for TAL readers. We hope that you'll like it enough to visit our web site, at www.openletters.net, browse through our archives, and subscribe to the free weekly magazine (it's easy to do once you get to the web site), so that you can continue to receive this kind of writing every Sunday, delivered right to your computer.

This issue contains six letters and one conversation. The first letter is from X., a writer and mother in Winnipeg, Manitoba, who's chosen to publish anonymously in our pages. Her letter, about her thirteen-year-old son, is addressed to her son's absent father.

Sarah Vowell's open letter, originally published on July 4th, is about Mel Gibson, George Washington, and patriotism. Sarah is, as you know, the author of *Take the Cannoli*, and the consigliere of "This American Life."

There's a letter from me, about a strange moment of coincidence in a bookstore in San Francisco.

Ian Brown, who is the co-founder of *Open Letters* and a radio host in Toronto, writes about reading, and not reading, *Paradise Lost*.

John Hodgman describes a family trip last summer to the Jersey shore. His letter also touches on the subjects of memory, forgetting, and beef jerky. John is a former literary agent who lives in Brooklyn.

Michael Welch, a young newspaper reporter and diarist in Tampa, Florida, writes about attending the final rally of Al Gore's 2000 campaign, which took place at 5:30 in the morning on Election Day.

And Deirdre Dolan, an *Open Letters* contributing editor, offers up her interview with Sarah Jones, the most popular girl in the sixth grade. Deirdre and Sarah talk about the hows and whys of popularity, which seem often to involve potato chips.

We hope you'll enjoy this special issue, and that you'll come visit our web site and sign up for more mail.

Yours truly,

Paul Tough

Inheritance

A letter from X., on her son and his father.

Winnipeg, Manitoba • June 22, 2000

Dear Mike,

He's thirteen and a half, which you probably know, and things are happening. So, first thing this morning, when his eyes open and his sheet is as always inexplicably half off his bed, he grabs his CD remote control and pushes play and we hear Fatboy Slim all over the house (same house as always, only it's red and yellow now, not blue). He comes downstairs, all arms and legs and skinny, he's tall, taller than me, in his Joe Boxer boxers and sits at the dining room table eating Honey Nut Cheerios and reading yesterday's comics. He has the number 60 on his leg in black marker. That was his number yesterday at the provincial basketball try-outs, which he didn't make due to lack of confidence, said the coach, though he's got the moves, and next year he'll be older and ready. It doesn't bug him, none of his friends made it this year, and his school coach had told them they wouldn't but that it would be a good experience. That's what he and his friends said to each other after the try-out. Hey, good experience, eh? Oh yeah, excellent experience. Now *that* was a good experience! They're pretty funny. Then he goes downstairs and has a shower, listening to Kid Rock, heard of him? Last fall C. and him went to Minneapolis for a Vikings game and Kid Rock was staying in the same hotel, drinking in the bar, but O. was too shy to go up to him and say hello.

There's one song he plays over and over which goes everybody knows my name, say it way out loud, or something like that, over and over, loud while he showers. Sometimes he sings along, but not today. Then he has to decide to wear shorts or jeans because it's June here and you know what that's like. He decides on shorts, long and baggy, with the elastic top of his underwear visible above his shorts, and his shorts low on his hips, and his Nike hooded sweatshirt (he used to boycott Nike and McDonald's, but not recently)

and his Adidas runners and white socks, and still, in spite of showering, a faded 60 on his leg. His vaguely hairy shin.

He's got a choice this morning for lunch: bagel and cream cheese, turkey sandwich, or peanut butter and banana sandwich. He chooses peanut butter and banana. He plays around with the dog for a while, tells G., his ten-year-old sister (yup, I got pregnant again) who's getting ready for running club, that when HE had running club they ran in the rain because they were tougher back then, and then he checks out his reflection in the toaster oven and off he goes to catch his bus for school. Have a good day, I tell him, and he says you too. I can't call out to him after he's left the house with I love you, or Do you have your lunch? This mortifies him. Later today he's got a different basketball practice for the regional team, which he did make, and he's going to miss his baseball game to go to the basketball practice. His baseball team is called the Sabres, and he pitches and catches, and he's a great pitcher with a wicked curve although he prefers to catch, and if you could see him make the throw from home plate to second you'd know how good he is. Then I guess he'll come home and eat ice cream with chocolate sauce and watch some bad television, he loves the comedy channel, and Letterman, he loves Letterman too and thinks it's cool that Letterman and Nolan Ryan and his grandma all had the same kind of heart surgery, maybe check out something on the net like the phone number of that phone booth in the middle of the desert so he can call it some day and then go to bed after some kidding around and he'll call out from his freshly painted green and charcoal bedroom, hey, whoever put my sheet back on, thanks!

What's he doing at night, what's he dreaming? Do you believe that dreams can be inher-

ited? That they can encode themselves on our DNA and we can give our dreams and our nightmares to our kids? Some people believe it. You and he could be dreaming the same dream one night and the next morning passing each other on the street and not even recognizing each other. Then he'll get up again and come downstairs and tell us he forgot to put his cream on his foot for the athlete's foot he has, and we'll say make sure you keep it clean and dry, and he'll say uh-huh. As for what goes on inside his head, really goes on inside his head, he's a thirteen-year-old boy, you tell me. I remember once you said never uproot a kid in junior high. I won't.

I know you want to know one thing, but I'm not gonna tell you whether he talks about you or not or what he even remembers. I've tried

to keep track of you through your brother but I don't think he lives here anymore either. A family of gypsies. The last time I saw his wife, she was loading up their kid, who also has red hair, into a minivan right across the street from our house. A cute little kid and I almost called O. over to the window to have a look at his cousin for the first and only time. But I didn't because it seemed too complicated. I don't know. Where do you live? Japan still, or what, Australia? Like you'd tell me. I'm not asking for money, I'm not asking for anything. I just want to tell you about your kid before there's no kid left, and we're both a hundred years old. It seems so stupid not to talk. Keep a stiff upper lip, there are a million things I could tell you, but you don't get to choose.

X.



American Dreams

A letter from Sarah Vowell, on patriotism and *The Patriot*.

New York City • July 4, 2000

Dear Paul,

Maybe the nicest thing about seeing *The Patriot* was standing in the ticket line, hearing my fellow Americans say that word. "Two for *The Patriot* please." "One for *The Patriot* at 5:30." Because no one I know uses the P word anymore. If they do, it's an adjective – patriotic. But I seem to move in circles where even that word has been replaced by "jingoistic." Like the other night at the Magnolia Bakery after dinner – I was with some friends and we stopped in for dessert – everyone went for the cookies or the banana cream pudding with 'Nilla wafers except for one guy, Andy. I pointed at his cupcake with the little American flag stuck in the top and asked him, "What made you get that?"

"I was feeling jingoistic," he said.

I enjoyed the movie. Watching a story line like that is always a relief. Of course the British must be expelled, just as the Confederates must surrender, Hitler must be crushed and yee-haw when the Red Sea swallows those slave-mongering Egyptians. At yet another recent dinner Stephen and I were arguing with Eric about the British royal family, whom Eric likes because "they make no sense." We spent forty-five minutes yelling, "No, Eric, there shouldn't be a monarchy!" It was the most fun I've had in months, taking the moral high ground on a topic free of the pitfalls of Cuban children or Palestinian statehood.

I've read some editorials about *The Patriot*, the kind that always accompany any historical film, written by professors who insist things nobody cares about like Salieri wasn't that bad a sort or Roman gladiators maybe didn't really have Australian accents. A little anachronism is part of the fun, and I don't mind if in real life General Cornwallis never lost a battle in the South, as he does rather

gloriously in the film. Isn't art supposed to improve on life?

Personally, I think there's more than enough historical accuracy in *The Patriot* to keep the spoilsports happy. I'm part spoilsport, on my father's side, and I felt nagged with quandaries every few minutes during the three-hour film. American history is a quagmire, and the more one knows about it, the quaggier the mire gets. If you're paying attention during *The Patriot* and you know your history and you have a stake in that history, not to mention a conscience, the movie is not an entirely cartoonish march to glory. For example, Mel Gibson's character, Benjamin Martin, doesn't want to fight the British at the beginning of the movie because he still feels bad about chopping up some Cherokee into little pieces during the French and Indian War. At that point, as a part-Cherokee person myself, I lost a little of the sympathy I'd stored up for Mel because he'd been underrated in *Conspiracy Theory*. And did I mention Mel's character lives in South Carolina? So at the end of the movie, you look at the youngest Mel junior bundled in his mother's arms and think, Mel just risked his life so that that kid's kids can rape their slaves and vote to be the first state to secede from the Union.

Now, I am not one of those America-first, flags-on-the-front-porch kind of patriots. I am more of a "despite" patriot, believing in the inherent truth and beauty of the nation's founding documents despite the fact we've never, not even in the beginning – especially in the beginning – lived up to anything close to a more perfect union. But (A) show me somewhere better (and if you say your native Canada, Paul, I suggest you tell me why you moved to L.A.), and (B), I think I'm a better person because I have words like "more perfect union" to live up to. The other day, in the subway at 5:30, I was crammed into my

sweaty, crabby fellow citizens and I kept whispering under my breath "we the people, we the people" over and over again, reminding myself we're all in this together and they had as much right – exactly as much right – as I to be in the muggy underground on their way to wherever they were on their way to.

The Patriot did confirm that I owe George Washington an apology. I always liked George fine, though I dismissed him as a mere soldier. I prefer the pen to the sword, so I've always been more of a Jeffersonhead. The words of the Declaration of Independence are so right and true that it seems like its poetry alone would have knocked King George III in the head. Like, he would have read this beloved passage, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights – that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," and thought the notion so just, and yet still so wonderfully whimsical, that he would have dethroned himself on the spot. But no, it took a grueling, eight-year-long war to make independence a fact.

I never think of this.

I think about the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution all the time. Mainly because I watch a lot of TV. I keep my small, 95-cent copy of the two documents handy so that I can fact-check the Constitutional interpretations in the shows of David E. Kelley and Aaron Sorkin. In my little booklet, the Declaration and the Constitution are separated by only a blank half-page. I forget that there are eleven years between them, eleven years of war and the whole Articles of Confederation debacle. In my head, the two documents are like the A-side and B-side of the greatest single ever released, recorded in one great drunken night, but no, there's a lot of bleeding life between them. Dead boys and dead Indians and Valley Forge.

I'm not much on war stories. I haven't hit anyone since I was twelve years old (hi,

Sherry). I prefer verbal sparring, so I like courtroom dramas and, especially, Sorkin's "The West Wing." It's about the senior White House staff. It often leaves me clutching my Constitution in tears. It's a little hokey, but that's why I like it. Sometimes the framer-style rhetoric is so intense it sounds like an action movie. They really say things like, "Let's get out there and raise the level of public discourse!"

I swear Aaron Sorkin is sitting around with his 95-cent copy of the Constitution, too, reading the obscure bits. He conjured one surprisingly emotional story line, for example, out of the rather dry Article I, Section 2, the mandate for the census. Sorkin has picked up on something so obvious and simple. Namely, that the Constitution is and was a bottomless pit of story ideas – a prophecy of the stories that were to come. Any of the first ten Amendments contains within it the potential energy of a million stories waiting to unfold. Freedom of the press? *Citizen Kane*. The death of Diana. *All the President's Men*. The right to bear arms? *Columbine*, Lee Harvey Oswald, the scene in *Hannah and her Sisters* when Woody Allen's trying to kill himself with a shotgun but his forehead's so sweaty, the barrel slides off his face and the bullet flies into the wall. The right to a speedy and public trial? O.J., anyone?

A couple of times, I've forgotten to put the little Constitution booklet back on the shelf, and friends have stopped by, noticing it resting under the remote controls. I think they find my patriotism an amusing affectation – that it's cute and old-fashioned, the way I feel about the adorable way David's always bringing up Oscar damn Levant. I guess because my patriotism is so sentimental, so unthreatening. No one's ever put a bayonet in my hands to back it up. The closest I've come is shooting a Canadian while playing laser tag and going to Starbucks afterward: I sure miss you.

Happy Fourth of July,

Sarah

A Billion to One

A letter from Paul Tough, on a moment of coincidence.

San Francisco, California • June 21, 2000

Dear Deirdre,

I was in a bookstore today, in the plays section, which is a section I don't ordinarily spend a lot of time in. I was looking at Tom Stoppard plays (I'd forgotten he'd co-written *Shakespeare in Love* until I saw the closing credits in your hotel room Saturday night), like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which I read the opening scene of, sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor.

Then I picked up another Stoppard play, *The Real Thing*, and started reading it at the beginning of the first scene. There was music playing in the store, and at this particular moment it was "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off." You know: you say tomato and I say tomato. Picture this: the song's still playing, and I'm reading, and I get to the third page, where this man and his wife are having a disagreement about the pronunciation of a word, and the man, the character of the man, says, in a sing-song voice, "Let's call the whole thing off." And I read those words just as the song comes to its jazzy conclusion, with the singing of that very line.

I looked around for someone to tell, but there wasn't anyone, and I wasn't sure how big a deal it was anyway. True, it was probably the only time that line occurred in any book in the play section, but it probably appears in other books; there's probably a scene in some novel where someone jokingly sings "Let's call the whole thing off." And I don't really believe in coincidence; I know the mathematical fact that yes, maybe hearing "Let's call the whole thing off" sung while reading the line "Let's call the whole thing off" is a one-in-a-billion chance, but I've read a billion books and listened to a billion songs while I read, and they've never once synched up until now, so it's just the law of averages that it would happen at this moment, on this particular afternoon. There's no significance behind the song, or the line, or the play, or the sentiment;

I shouldn't take it as a sign to stage the play or buy the CD or, in fact, to call the whole thing off, or to decide on a thing that I might want to call off and then call it off, and give as my reason that I received a message in the form of the confluence of a line from a song and line from a play.

But it is a little weird that the scene I was reading right before *The Real Thing*, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, is actually about probability and chance and meaning; it's the scene, as you probably remember, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are playing a game where they flip a coin and if it's heads Rosencrantz gets the coin and if it's tails Guildenstern gets it (or perhaps vice versa; I can't remember, even though I read it this very afternoon), and it keeps coming up heads (that much I remember), seventy or eighty times in a row, a billion-to-one chance, but as Stoppard has the characters discuss, there's nothing so odd about that; each flip is just as likely to be a head as a tail, so it's no surprise, really, that each one is a head.

What I wonder is whether life is better or richer or cooler if you go around believing in coincidence and signs and auguries, seeing meaning in every billboard and opportunity in every meeting. There's something about that kind of life that seems young and hopeful. It strikes me as particularly collegiate, though that may be only because in college I was hanging out a lot with Howard and Beverly, two of the most superstitious people I've ever met. They used to flip coins for every decision, from ice cream flavors to graduate school. They worshipped randomness.

There's a way of thinking about the world when you're young, before you've learned all the rules of social order and acceptable behavior and career path, where you think that anything can happen, when you believe

in ghosts and angels and UFOs and government conspiracies and true love, and everything seems connected, or at least sometimes it does.

Like when I went to see *Hannah and Her Sisters* with Howard and Beverly and Ashleigh at Loews 84th, and in the movie Woody Allen is dissuaded from killing himself by seeing a Marx Brothers movie at the Metro Theater at 99th and Broadway, which was in fact the very same theater where I'd seen the very same Marx Brothers movie a week earlier, with Ashleigh.

Or the time when I was hanging out with Lara and Mary and Alexis in high school, and Lara and I were going out to eat or something, and there was a deck of cards on the table, and as we were walking out I cut the deck and said "four of diamonds" and turned it over, and it was.

I can still feel the feeling that I had on each of those two occasions, of wanting to be part of

something big and significant and magical, and half-believing that I was; of half-believing that I shared mystical connections with the people around me, as well as with Woody Allen, or Tom Stoppard for that matter. I don't really feel that any more, even when I receive such a clear and obvious bell-ringing light-flashing sign as picking up entirely at random a play I've never read, by Tom Stoppard, a playwright who writes about coincidence, and starting on page one, and by page three a character is singing the song that's playing in the bookstore.

What did I want? A character to say, "Hmmm, don't you think Paul Tough should call the whole thing off?" And another character to say, "Yes, perhaps he should"? Would that have satisfied me?

Yes. That would have done it. But nothing less.

Yours,

Paul



Fallen Angels

A letter from Ian Brown, on reading and not reading *Paradise Lost*.

Toronto, Ontario • October 6, 2000

Dear David:

The only other time I tried to read *Paradise Lost* – John Milton's late-Renaissance rendering of the Fall of Man, the greatest epic poem in the English language, the anvil of words upon which every subsequent poem has been forged, the only contender to Shakespeare's greatness, quite possibly the most profound meditation on good and evil ever written – I managed exactly 125 lines, or less than 1 per cent of the endlessly acclaimed masterpiece, in six months. I kept falling asleep at

So spake th'apostate angel, though in pain....

But this summer, while everyone else was out having a good time and the world seemed to be an oversold, venal, thoughtless, cramped and unwashed place, I decided to try something difficult, for a change, and read one of the all-time monster brain-crackers of Serious Literature, from start to finish.

I borrowed a shack in the Pocono Mountains of northern Pennsylvania and packed one copy of *Paradise Lost* and two T-shirts. No telephone, no TV, no one.

Strange coincidences sprang up almost immediately. In the notebook I grabbed as I rushed from my house, I found the words to "Ripple," by the Grateful Dead, copied out in my wife's neat and efficient hand:

If my words did glow with the gold of sunshine
And my tunes were played on the harp unstrung
Would you hear my voice come through the music
Would you hold it near, as it were your own?
It's a hand-me-down; the thoughts are broken
Perhaps they're better left unsung.

Somehow that sentiment didn't seem foreign to the theme of *Paradise Lost*. Nor did the eight-hundred-mile blight of endless Big Boys, Price Choppers and McDonald's restaurants that line the road from Toronto

to Pennsylvania. Everywhere I looked I saw former paradises. Finally in Scranton I saw a sign that said "A Good Place to Start Feeling Better," so I checked into a hotel. It was a Day's Inn, and was itself next to a Price Chopper and a McDonald's. A trucker and his wife were having a private barbecue in the parking lot. That was nice, and so was the hickory smoke coming up off his portable hibachi. "Tired?" the guy at the check-in said. "Get some rest." The door of my room wore a sign:

ALWAYS LOCK YOUR DOOR. USE ALL LOCKS.

I lay on the bed and listened to the trucks vibrating by on the highway, vibrating on to everywhere but where I was. I turned on the radio, and a voice said, "Who says you can't eat the food you want and still lose weight? Just use Fat Whacker! And be careful not to lose too *much* weight!" I turned off the radio and turned on the TV. A blond weather-person on a local newscast smiled out of the set at me as she bantered with her fellow newscasters. "Mother's Day is a week away," she said, "so if you haven't bought a present to show your mother your respect, there's still time to do so. Storms to come."

I turned off the TV, and cracked open *Paradise Lost*.

All Miltonists – and there are many of them; they tend to be detail weenies, to be terrifyingly well-read, to love marathon readings of the text, and to be able to cite lines from memory by book and line number – end up debating one question: Whose side is Milton on? Grumpy God's (as C. S. Lewis believed), the side of subjugation of the self and salvation? Or silky Satan's (as William Blake famously insisted), the casino world where you can be you, but entirely on your own?

God seems to have the upper hand, at least as the poem opens, with Satan dazed and face-up in a lake of fire, after Mr. Big Stuff hurls him from Heaven for being uppity. It's a promising start, very sci-fi. But then God quickly becomes a bore and a martinet.

Satan, on the other hand, is for most of us in the twenty-first century a (frighteningly) pleasant ball of charm. For all his lack of empathy and his tireless schemes to overthrow Heaven, Satan shows some class. He never apologizes, never makes excuses for himself. "To bow and sue for grace/With suppliant knee...That were an ignominy and shame beneath this downfall." Satan turns out to be a combination of Bill Clinton and Wile E. Coyote, insisting he's never done anything anybody with a little ambition wouldn't do.

Life in Eden, by contrast, resembles a Soviet propaganda film from the 1950s extolling the virtues of happy blond life on the collective. Not only do Adam and Eve have to obey God; God, the ultimate Bossy Boots, constantly reminds them they have to be obedient.

Is it any wonder Eve ate the apple?

One night, deep into Book Nine (the only chapter of twelve that actually happens in anything like what screenwriters call "real time"), I went for dinner to a local bar. The Pines Tavern was a typical Pennsylvania highway joint, festooned with yellow flags hailing Coors beer and blue flags touting the Philadelphia Eagles. I later learned my late father-in-law drank himself to death there. Three couples in their sixties were sitting at an oak bar, drinking and flirting and laughing while choking to death ("We're hell-raising! Heh heh heh heh heh heeuuuaaallllllggghhh") – the usual rituals of the post-industrial American Dream. It was the perfect setting to read one of the classics of Western literature.

The waitress recommended the broasted chicken. "It's actually a lot better than roasted," she said. I thought that meant broiled and roasted, hence healthier. In fact the bird

had been *breaded*, then roasted, and looked like lumps of slag from a recently cooled planet. I stabbed a piece and turned back to *Paradise Lost*.

It was the crux of the action. Satan had turned himself into a serpent, and now "the wily adder, blythe and glad" was trying to convince Eve to eat an apple from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge.

"Some good homework?" the waitress said, writing out my cheque.

"Just a project." I flipped the book to show her the cover. A mistake, I realized instantly.

"Ooo-kay," she said. "You're thinking way too much."

"Actually," I said, "I'm probably not thinking enough."

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry."

I was about to get up when a loud new talk show appeared on the TV screen above the bar. The show consisted of young men talking about the times they'd thrown up. Then they called out to some busty girls in Dutch peasant costumes who were serving steins of beer to the studio audience. "Juggies!!" the men called. That was the name of the costumed girls. "Dance us out to commercial!"

That was when I left. Reading *Paradise Lost* can make you feel that way, especially at first – ashamed somehow, as if you belong nowhere in the modern world.

The first person to read *Paradise Lost*, Milton's Quaker friend Thomas Elwood, thought it was brilliant. Few have disagreed since, thanks largely to the poem's 10,565-line title bout between an inhuman God and an all-too-human Satan. But if *Paradise Lost* is so brilliant, why does it feel so heavy? Why have so many of the literary lasting – Johnson, Coleridge, Pope, Borges, dozens of others – felt obligated to defend it? More to the point, why did it make me fall

asleep? One day, in two-and-a-half hours, between Miltonic naps, I read sixty-five lines. That's eight words every two minutes. Twenty-five lines were like a draught of chloral hydrate. Anything could distract me from its grandeur. One day early in my unsuccessful efforts to read the poem, during a stretch back in town, I kept a list:

Milton (four lines)
Ultimate Cribbage
Milton (fifteen lines)
Nap
Free Cell/Ultimate Cribbage
Oral-sex pictures on the Internet
Nap
Milton (ten lines)
Oral-sex pictures
Nap

It isn't bad writing (as Samuel Johnson claimed) that makes *Paradise Lost* exhausting; it's the poem's very brilliance, the same quality that made it riveting hundreds of lines at a time when I finally managed to swim through the narcoleptic sea that surrounded the poem on all sides. In *Paradise Lost*, Good and Evil stand face to face, with Judgment between them, and the clarity is seductive. In our own borderless, morally relative world anything goes; the more forcefully you can rationalize your behaviour, the more successful you tend to be. What drove me to escape into sleep, and what kept me reading, was the poem's strict and vivid insistence that there is right and wrong; that we can't help but fail; and that we have to admit it.

What happens in *Paradise Lost* is that Adam and Eve become human. The poem is the history of the self, the story of how the human conscience came to be. I found it a surprisingly traumatic read. And even more surprising, a comfort. Maybe that's why I took so long to read it: when I was in the world of *Paradise Lost* I felt clear and clean.

Before Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, he stopped writing poetry altogether, and spent about seventeen years as Oliver Cromwell's public relations man. (This fact cheers up many

aging writers.) He was anti-monarchist, anti-church, anti-censorship, but in favor of divorce and the beheading of Charles I. By the time Milton turned fifty, however, his situation was dire. Cromwell was dead; Charles II was on the English throne; a retro number called the Restoration was underway. Imprisoned and released, Milton was on the outs and frequently afraid for his life; his fame fading, his fortune expropriated, his pamphlets burned. He was also twice-widowed, blind, and the father of three children.

So what does Milton do? He marries a girl twenty-five years his junior and begins to dictate *Paradise Lost*, the masterwork he has been planning in his head for twenty years. He prefers to do so leaning back in a chair with a leg thrown over one arm. He manages an average of forty lines a day "as it were in a breath," and then cuts half of them. Seven years later he is finished. *Paradise Lost* is an instant hit. These days Shakespeare's plays enjoy more of a life outside English departments, especially in Hollywood. But between 1700 and 1800, *Paradise Lost* was republished more than 100 times, twice as often as anything by the Bard.

What's most impressive about Milton is his grasp of the big picture. He knows he's writing in the big leagues, and his aim and concentration never stray from universal concerns. He's *confident*. He has what Virginia Woolf later spotted as the thing that lasts in literature: certainty of judgment. It makes me think that it is impossible to write anything that will last even the writer's lifetime unless the writer believes in a moral universe – in God, for starters. Because without such a belief, without a strong faith in a moral universe, how can you know, with enough certainty to tell it in an authoritative way, what will happen when an unhappily married woman has an affair with a cad? Or when poor boy meets rich girl? You have to believe in something, anyway, to tell an effective story.

Milton thought of talent in the same way the Biblical parable does, as a fist-sized sack of gold from God. It was not to be squandered.

The exercise of that talent required discipline, which as a paid-up Puritan he considered spiritually hygienic to boot. Getting up every day at four a.m. and reading the Hebrew Bible for a couple of hours before dictating forty lines of *Paradise Lost* wasn't just a mental lubricant; it was colonic irrigation for his soul. "He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things," Milton once wrote, "ought himself to be a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things." Live well, he says, and you will write well. But how easy is that?

Suddenly, one day in August, as if a door blew open, I was finished. One of the few things Martin Amis and his late father Kingsley agreed on (though they weren't alone) was that the last 150 lines of *Paradise Lost* stand as some of the best poetry ever written. The Son of God sacrifices himself for Adam's sins, which turns out to be some consolation for our own inevitably approaching deaths. But Milton buries the lede:

...For then the earth
Shall all be Paradise, far happier place
Than this Eden, and far happier days....
then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far.

Earth will be a happier Paradise than Eden ever could; the unhappy Fall of man will be his unexpected redemption. It turns out that a difficult time in history or in life can be cured by difficulty, by strictness, even by reading a difficult poem – by adhering to some unchanging standard. We could even read *Paradise Lost* and relearn how one becomes human, not through triumph but by failing.

I put the poem down, and stepped outside.

Next door to the cabin was the Caesar's Palace Cove Haven Honeymoon Resort, the self-described "Land of Love" and "Honeymoon Capital of the World." I decided to take a tour. Contented couples strolled hand in hand across the Haven's greensward. Every room had a king-sized round bed and a heart-shaped tub, and some of them had seven-foot-high whirlpool baths in the form of champagne glasses. (Cove Haven had been the brain wave of a plumber.)

But what caught my eye were the Garden of Eden Apples. The Apples were pie-shaped windowless rooms in a series of round concrete bunkers. "You'll notice there're no windows," Cheryl, my guide, pointed out. "So no one can see in. It's like you're in your own world."

"Why do they call them Apples?" I asked.

"You know, the whole scenario with Adam and Eve and temptation and desire and fulfillment. The whole Biblical thing?"

"But," I said, "I thought they weren't supposed to eat the apple."

"Well," Cheryl said matter-of-factly, "here they can do whatever they want."

I was back in my own time. I could tell, because I was once again ashamed of myself.

Even more respectfully,

Ian



Wish Lists

A letter from John Hodgman, on memory and chaos.

Ocean City, New Jersey • August 20, 2000

To whom it may concern:

Dad and Katherine and I begin the drive from Brookline, Massachusetts, to Ocean City, New Jersey, at 12:33 PM, Saturday, 19 August.

The driving is broken into shifts of three hours or one hundred and fifty miles, whichever comes later. We had first planned to stop in New York City and spend the night at Katherine's and my apartment, but we decide, impetuously, to push through. This means we do not pick up the digital camera from K's sister in New York as planned. Thus, no record of this journey exists, except for this letter. I have not consulted any notes in composing these facts; they are, to the best of my immediate memory, accurate.

Our route is as follows: 1) The Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) heading west; 2) I-84 West; 3) The Saw Mill Parkway South; 4) The Tappan Zee Bridge; 5) I-287/87 North; 6) The Garden State Parkway South to New Jersey Shore Points.

In Ocean City, we will rendezvous with my mother's five sisters, her one brother, and their families, who normally live in Philadelphia, where my mother grew up. They will stay at my Aunt Susan's house at 19th Street and Boardwalk. We will stay at the ground-level apartment my grandmother has rented for the past three summers. It is on St. Charles Place between Atlantic and Corinthian, just down the street from the church where the Mass for my mother will be held in one week: Saint Francis Cabrini.

My grandmother passed away last 26 December. She died due to complications following the surgical removal of what was presumed to be a cancerous tumor from her lung, though we have never received the results of the biopsy. Her husband, my mother's father, passed away six years ago, of colon cancer.

Rest stops:

We stop first at the Charlton Plaza on the Mass. Turnpike for Taco Bell bean burritos, Katherine's new favorite. We purchase three: two for K, one for me, and an additional Burrito Supreme for me. Dad has two hot dogs.

Our second stop is at a Texaco station just off of I-84 at exactly mile 150. We purchase beef jerky (brand: "Oh Boy" Oberto) and four bags of rare Snyder's jalapeno-flavored pretzel pieces. The beef jerky is for me and K, who are attempting to eat fewer carbs and more protein in an effort to shed the many pounds we have gained since quitting smoking. The pretzel pieces are for my aunt Judy, who since that one time has never been able to find them in her local supermarket.

Stop three is a service plaza on the New Jersey Turnpike at about mile 300. Inside, K and Dad both get frozen yogurt: vanilla, with jimmies.

Only about fifty miles left. At this point, K's and my game of Scrabble is abandoned after a heated dispute over the acceptability of the word "injun." K claims that, as slang, it is acceptable. I challenge, predicting that it does not appear in the official Scrabble dictionary, as the third edition has cleaned out all shits, fucks, and potentially offensive or insensitive terms. I am correct.

K claims this is poor sportsmanship on my part. Play the words, not the dictionary: that is her Scrabble philosophy. There is no philosophy, is my philosophy. Instead, there are rules. Challenging is within the rules, and I will use the rules to my advantage, however small, and I will do so ruthlessly and un-apologetically. Without rules there is only chaos.

At this point, the New York radio stations we first picked up around Danbury begin to fade.

The New Jersey Parkway is broken up frequently by toll plazas, designed to slow traffic. The price of passage is nominal: thirty-five cents – like last summer, but not like a few years ago, when I swear it was only a quarter. Though my memory may be incorrect here.

8:30 PM: arrival. We drive directly to Susan's house. In descending order of age, these are my mother's siblings, with parenthetical notes describing their families:

1. Jim, brother (husband to Anita. Previously married to Kay, whom he divorced, and then Linda, who died of cancer)
2. Janice (widowed, was married to Mike, no children)
3. Susan (widowed, was married to John, who died of cancer, and with whom she had two sons, Matt, 16, and Andrew, 12. Currently married to Tom, who is the dean of discipline at an all-girls' school)
4. Beth (never married)
5. And the twins: Judy (wife to Ralph, mother of Kyle, 8, Casey, 6, and Connor, 2); and Jane (wife to Joe, mother of Erin, 8, Dan, 6, and Kerriane, 1).

All of the above are present when we arrive except for Jim, Anita, and Janice, who will be joining us in a few days.

All of the younger children, my cousins, have made wish lists for the summer, which they share with me and K. Hoped-for activities include:

- "Jetskiing"
- "Cape May Zoo"
- "Fly Kites"
- "Wonderland Pier with JK" ["JK" refers to John Kellogg, who is me; as opposed to John Francis, who is my dad]

- "Mini golf with Katherine"
- "Ride trolley with everyone"

The last item on Kyle's list is: "Say sorry about Aunt Eileen."

Eileen was my mother. She died on June 9 of this year of lung cancer. An interesting thing is that I could never remember her birthday. I forced myself to recall it last year, thank god, but even to this day I have no idea what I gave her as a present.

11:00 PM: departure from Susan's. Before heading to my grandmother's empty apartment, we stock up at the WaWa Market at West Avenue and 18th Street. There we purchase: string cheese, beef jerky (brand: cannot recall, but there is an American Indian on the label), eggs, milk, scrapple, and other staples. Then we buy gas. I offer twenty dollars to Dad for food and gas, and he attempts to refuse it.

My grandmother's apartment is dark and musty. Before going to sleep, I make eggs and scrapple for K, which we eat in front of the television. Dad goes to bed in the front bedroom. We go to bed in the back bedroom. It is cool and breezy: unseasonably so. Before falling asleep, I read twelve pages of the book *Brain Fitness* by Dr. Robert Goldman, which is about exceptional super mind power and the benefit of making lists from memory, to train the mind against forgetfulness and stimulate neural growth.

Today it is Sunday, 20 August, 2000. My mother's birthday is 27 November, 1941. I am training myself against forgetfulness.

John

This Monumental Battle

A letter from Michael Welch, on staying up all night with Al Gore.

Tampa, Florida • November 7, 2000

Dear Paul,

Last night I closed The Hub. It's a little bar in downtown Tampa with famously, almost undrinkably strong drinks. During the day the place is filled with troubled people and the smell of urine. But at night cheery, horny college kids join the crowd of depressed daytime drunks, and at 3 A.M. the bartenders have to turn the lights on to scare everyone out. As 3 A.M. approached last night, I didn't want to leave. I was busy having a great conversation, I think, with this beautiful woman who was about a foot taller than I was.

We were talking, of course, about the election, which was going to take place in a few hours. Instead of admitting that I really didn't care about the election, I overcompensated by talking about it very loudly.

A guy with a typical central-Florida mullet haircut stopped by our table and said, "Y'know, Al Gore is giving a speech or something in Tampa at 4 A.M."

"He must be trying to capture the drunkard's vote," I said. "Where's the rally at: an after-hours club?" The tall woman laughed.

"No," said the mullet. "At the cancer center." Everyone stopped laughing. The word "cancer" will do that. The guy explained that Tampa was the last stop on Gore's thirty-hour final campaign swing. This was it, he said: the whole campaign was going to end a few miles away. History would be made, in Tampa.

A week earlier Al Gore had held a rally a couple blocks from the newspaper where I work, and Jimmy Buffett performed. I fucking hate Jimmy Buffett. I used to work in a beach-style restaurant across the street from the stadium and the people who ran the restaurant were Parrotheads (that's what official Jimmy Buffett fans call themselves). I had to listen to Buffett constantly. And when he'd play at the stadium, the bar would turn up the Buffett even louder and

hire a Buffett cover band to play on the outside patio and the Parrotheads would all take the day off from their corporate jobs and gather and drink and puke on each other per Buffett's musical suggestion. Now when I see a group of drunk Parrotheads with their hands in a prayer position on top of their heads, all pantomiming the "fins to the left...fins to the right" routine, I want to smash something. I didn't want to go see history being made if it was going to involve Jimmy Buffett.

The bartenders turned the lights on and everyone ran outside real quick before the people they were trying to sleep with saw their drunk, red faces under the unflattering fluorescence.

"So, you wanna go to my house and drink a bit more," I said, looking up into the woman's face.

"No, we should go see Al Gore," she answered.

You do what you gotta do. We got in my truck and smoked a joint as we drove across town to the cancer center. On the radio Fred Durst was shouting,

Now I know you be lovin' this shit right here!
L. I. M. P. Bizkit is right here!

"Now that's some lyrical genius," I said, passing the joint to her. "Not many artists realize that words rhyme with themselves. Y'know? Any time you're stuck for a rhyme, you can just use the same word twice: it always works. Bon Jovi does that shit too."

"Bon Jovi played on behalf of Al Gore last night in Miami," she told me.

At that moment I hated Al Gore.

We drove onto the campus and found the parked motorcade of limos, police motorcy-

cles, busses, and an ambulance out front of the cancer center. We joined a crowd of about 75 supporters with Gore signs standing on the curb across the street. A bunch of drunken fraternity guys were taking group pictures with a sign reading: "Phi Delta Theta supports Al Gore."

So far in Gore's camp we have Jimmy Buffett, Bon Jovi, and some meathead frat boys.

Five minutes later a woman in some kind of uniform, but without any badges or patches, came over and told us we weren't allowed to congregate. "This is State of Florida property," she said, meanly. "You can't stand here."

An old woman with a Gore sign said, timidly, "But it said in the paper he was going to be here at 4 A.M."

"He is. He's inside. But you can't see him 'cause it's not for the public. There's a public appearance later."

The old lady asked, kindly, "Where will that be?"

"I don't have to give you any information," the guard-type lady shouted. "I'm here to protect Al Gore. You have to leave."

The pack dispersed. I thought it was pretty funny that these people, who were so into politics that they'd stay up till 4 A.M. to see a presidential candidate, would do exactly what some anonymous woman told them to do, just because her clothes were dark and looked like a uniform. My tall date and I defiantly stuck around alone until a male police officer came by and asked us what we were doing.

"We just wanted to see the Vice President."

"Are you with the press?"

I could have said yes, since I am in fact a newspaper reporter. But I'd get fired for flashing my press pass around when I'm wasted and trying to get laid, so I said, "No, we just wanted to creep around and see if we

could get a look." Halfway through the sentence I realized that "creep around" was perhaps not the best phrase to use when trying to get near a potential President.

"He's just visiting people in the hospital," the officer said. "It's gonna be televised, but you're not going to get to see him here in person. After this he's holding a public rally at Democratic Headquarters downtown at 5:30." He gave us the address and smiled. He was very nice.

Back in the car I tried to think of ways to get out of going. "5:30 in the morning?" I said. "That's an hour and a half from now. By the time Gore speaks our hangovers will be taking effect. And there's nowhere to get more alcohol. At my house, there's beer." But she still wanted to go, and I still wanted her, so we headed back downtown.

The scene at Tampa Democratic Headquarters, across the parking lot from Jimmy's Sod, looked like an indie-rock concert was about to start: small P.A., small crowd of 150 people gathered in front of a small outdoor stage while another 200 lined up outside the gate to be frisked. Security weeded out the possible protesters and let campaign volunteers, the converted, in first, as "Love Train" blasted over the P.A.

Three eight-year-old girls ran weaving in and out of the line screaming about Gore, more impatient to see the man than their parents were. "When can we see Al Gore?" the girls yelled. Hearing their little voices say his name reminded me that last week, I had reluctantly entered a conversation about the election and realized halfway through that I had been referring to Al Gore as "Bob Dole." Nobody corrected me.

The crowd was smiley and happy and young and old and white. Not one black person.

On the way in the gate, they handed my date a sign. I declined. John Cougar Mellencamp was singing "Small Town." Then Stevie Wonder: "Higher Ground." Then John Mellencamp again with "R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A."

I lit a cigarette and noticed I was the only one smoking. I looked around for other smokers, expecting to be shot at any moment by the Secret Service guys who were creeping around with those curly wires coming from their ears. I finally spotted a stream of smoke across the crowd and traced it to the mouth of the sound guy. I knew him from hanging out in Tampa rock clubs. His name is RatBoy. He has a mullet too. I left my date to go talk to him.

"Good choice of music," I said to RatBoy, just as another John Cougar song started.

"I didn't pick it. They brought a CD."

"Music inspired by the Gore campaign?"

"Yeah, they told me to turn it up louder in..." He looked at his watch. "Two minutes: at 5:00 A.M."

I asked why and he cranked the P.A. two minutes early to demonstrate: the crowd began talking louder to be heard over the Mellencamp and the pitch and mood heightened noticeably: it suddenly seemed like a happening scene.

I left RatBoy and on the way back to my tall date I ran into one of my co-workers from the paper. He wasn't writing about the rally either. He just wanted to be part of history, he said. "This monumental battle is seeing its end not three blocks from my house!"

"Did you know Gore likes Bon Jovi?" I asked, watching the light drain from his eyes. It made me feel good.

A dark-haired seven-year-old boy, covered in Gore stickers from his face to his feet, climbed up on stage and held up a Gore sign and began a chant of "Gore! Gore! Gore!" I wondered if that's what the crowd chanted in the coliseum when the Christians were being fed to the lions. The Gore crowd waved their signs frantically and the music (that "B-b-b-baby, You Just Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet" song) blared. I heard someone behind me ask if the boy on stage was Elian Gonzalez.

I looked for my date and spotted her stretching her arms up, holding her sign high in the air, standing on her tiptoes, looking about nine feet tall. Her long, flat stomach was exposed as she stretched and bounced on the balls of her feet in rhythm with the Elian kid's chant and I was a little embarrassed for her so I went over to talk to her so she'd stop being so enthusiastic about politics.

By 5:15 A.M. the crowd was losing its wind a little. An hour and about a dozen John Cougar songs later, they seemed to have gained it back. Amazing. The sky was getting lighter. I couldn't believe I had stuck it out so long. And then came the cavalcade. I was blinded by a forest of "Gore/Lieberman 2000" signs.

Even after the signs stopped waving the crowd was still going nuts. I would have been going nuts too if, say, Prince were up there.

Florida Congressman Jim Davis introduced Lieberman, who sounded a lot like a baseball announcer; like Harry Carey, drawing out his vowels: "If we can win it heeeere, we're gonna win it eeeeeverywheeeere."

When Gore spoke I paid attention to the sign-language interpreter, who, judging from his enthusiasm, was himself a Gore supporter. His exaggerated hand signals and body gestures made him look like he was doing an Eminem impersonation.

The three politicians didn't talk much about the issues. They just kissed Florida's ass, which was striking because we really are the bastard state; we rarely get our ass kissed. But I have to say that Gore and company seemed pretty real. Maybe I'll vote for him, if I vote. I was way too tired to care a whole lot. I was so over it that I had even lost interest in my date and as soon as Gore said his last word and John Cougar started again, I offered to take her home.

tired,

Michael Welch

The Most Popular Girl in School

A conversation with Sarah Jones, about being number one.

Toronto, Ontario • June 24, 2000

Deirdre Dolan: What's your name, how old are you, and what grade are you in?

Sarah Jones: My name's Sarah Jones, I'm twelve years old, and I'm in sixth grade.

Deirdre: Where do you go to school?

Sarah: Shirley Street School in Toronto.

Deirdre: How many kids are there in your school?

Sarah: I would predict 300 people. I don't know.

Deirdre: Who's the most popular?

Sarah: Me. I'm number one.

Deirdre: What does number one mean?

Sarah: Everyone likes you. Everyone loves you. Everyone wants to be around you and stuff. You're good to them. They're good to you. When you're the populist girl in the school, you get like free chips at lunch time. Everything.

Deirdre: The populist?

Sarah: Yeah, the most popular.

Deirdre: Who gives you chips?

Sarah: Little kids. And you see little kids come up and hug you and stuff. They like you so much.

Deirdre: Is there a number two and three?

Sarah: Yes. Two is Chantelle and three is Samantha.

Deirdre: Who's Chantelle?

Sarah: She's one of my friends. She used to

be number one.

Deirdre: Does everyone know when number one changes?

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: How can they tell?

Sarah: They can just see.

Deirdre: What can they see?

Sarah: If we're in a group, I'm the first one and then there's the second, third, fourth and so on.

Deirdre: You mean you actually walk at the front of the group?

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: So how many times have you been number one before now?

Sarah: I've had it a couple of times.

Deirdre: When was the first time?

Sarah: Probably in December.

Deirdre: Do you remember it?

Sarah: A little bit. It was fun. It wasn't really a surprise. Everyone said that I should be number one.

Deirdre: What did it feel like?

Sarah: It felt like you were top of the world and stuff.

Deirdre: How did you find out?

Sarah: You just knew.

Deirdre: What time did you know?

Sarah: At lunchtime.

Deirdre: What happened?

Sarah: The kids were giving me all kinds of stuff.

Deirdre: How long does it usually last?

Sarah: Maybe a month, two months.

Deirdre: Can you remember what made you go from number one to number two the last time?

Sarah: Um, probably Chantelle would act better than me.

Deirdre: Like what?

Sarah: She'd give people gum and chips and everything.

Deirdre: Chips count for a lot in this school.

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: So what made you become number one this time?

Sarah: The guys stopped liking Chantelle and started liking me.

Deirdre: Why?

Sarah: Well, I'm not cruel to people. But Chantelle is, sometimes. And she'll act all hot-shot. She's pretty, but everyone doesn't like that if you go against her you'll be in a fight.

Deirdre: Why doesn't anyone want to fight with her?

Sarah: Because she'll get mad at you and you'll be like an outcast. She'll outcast you.

Deirdre: How?

Sarah: She won't let anyone talk to you. She'll be like, "OK people, don't talk to Sarah. She can hang out with the nerds."

Deirdre: So if she has all this power, how'd you replace her as the most popular?

Sarah: I don't know. She was the prettiest girl there until I came, but she had a bad attitude. I have an OK attitude. They like my personality and I'm not mean to them.

Deirdre: How many different people have been number one so far this year?

Sarah: Me, Chantelle, and Judy one time.

Deirdre: Tall Judy?

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: How'd she get to be so tall?

Sarah: She drinks a glass of milk a day. Her mom makes her drink milk so much.

Deirdre: How'd Judy get to be number one?

Sarah: Frankie just started liking her butt, and after Frankie started liking it everyone else did.

Deirdre: Why did having a nice butt make her popular?

Sarah: They'd tease her and play with her more. But now everyone hates her.

Deirdre: Do you remember how Judy lost number one?

Sarah: Frankie said she had a nice butt and then one day he woke up and goes "uh, her butt's ugly," and then everyone agreed with him.

Deirdre: Does number one, two, three include boys?

Sarah: No. It's only for the grade six girls.

Deirdre: What about kids in fifth grade?

Sarah: Fifth graders don't have to deal with this.

Deirdre: Why?

Sarah: They just can't. They're not graduating.

Deirdre: So?

Sarah: It's never happened before. They can't do it because they're going to do it next year.

Deirdre: Do the boys think it's stupid?

Sarah: They don't care. But the populist girl and guy have to go out. Last year it was Chantelle and Jesse, and the year before it was Chantelle and Jesse, and this year it changed.

Deirdre: You broke up the tradition?

Sarah: Jesse likes me more than Chantelle because he says that I'm pretty and have a nice personality. He doesn't like Chantelle's looks. He says that she's too fat for him and stuff.

Deirdre: Was she less fat last year?

Sarah: No, she was always like this. She has a big chest for a young person. Jesse said he went out with her because that's what everyone wanted, but then one day he thought, "Why am I going out with her?"

Deirdre: Did he explain that to you?

Sarah: Yes.

Deirdre: Where?

Sarah: At the spring concert. He was backstage with me and I asked him, "Why don't you like Chantelle?" Then I asked him, "So who do you like," because I just wanted to hear him say it, and he said me.

Deirdre: Do the guys always decide who's going to go out, or do girls sometimes decide?

Sarah: The guys.

Deirdre: That isn't annoying?

Sarah: You don't have to listen to them always, but sometimes they'll have a point.

Deirdre: Can you already tell which fifth graders are going to be popular next year?

Sarah: Next year Samantha, Amanda, Cecilia, and Ada are going to rule the school.

Deirdre: How come?

Sarah: They're stylish, they're nice, they hang out with us.

Deirdre: Will the whole thing start all over again next year in junior high?

Sarah: Yes.

Deirdre: How do you feel about that?

Sarah: I'm proud of it, that it's going to keep going on and on and on.

